

Whitney Smith, Whose Passion for Flags Became a Career, Dies at 76

By William Grimes

Nov. 22, 2016

Whitney Smith, who turned a childhood fascination with flags into a scholarly discipline — vexillology — of which he was the leading light, died on Thursday in Peabody, Mass. He was 76.

The cause was advanced Alzheimer's disease, his son Austin said.

Mr. Smith, the author of the standard work “Flags Through the Ages and Across the World” (1975), became obsessed with flags around the time he started kindergarten, his enthusiasm amplified by the heritage of his hometown, Lexington, Mass., and its annual displays on the town green.

“When I was 8 or so, I’d go down there before Patriots’ Day and tell the highway department crew how to set up the flags in the proper order of admission to the Union,” he told Smithsonian magazine in 1997. “The workers always looked as if they wished this kid would go home to his sandbox.”

While other boys were memorizing baseball statistics, he amassed newspaper clippings and articles on flags and wrote to obscure foreign consulates asking for precise information on colors, stripes and symbols.

“Some of the kids thought I was weird,” he told People magazine in 1985. “But to be 13 years old and literally the only person in the Western world who knew what the flag of Bhutan looked like, well, this was my world.”

The fever never cooled. At 18, deciding that the study of flags deserved its own name, he coined the term vexillology, combining the Latin word for flag, “vexillum,” with the Greek suffix meaning “the study of.” “I’ve been criticized because it combines Latin and Greek, a barbarism,” he told Smithsonian, “but I say, ‘I was a teenager!’”

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As a political science undergraduate at Harvard, he designed a flag for newly independent Guyana. In 1961, with a fellow enthusiast, Gerhard Grahl, he created the bimonthly Flag Bulletin, the first journal of its kind. A year later he founded the Flag Research Center, a consulting firm that answered inquiries from filmmakers, historians and commercial flag makers.



A cricket fan waved the Guyana flag in 2008. Andres Leighton/Associated Press

Mr. Smith designed flags for the Saudi Navy. He advised the Smithsonian Institution on how best to preserve the Star-Spangled Banner, the flag that flew over Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor during the War of 1812. He helped design flags for the islands of Bonaire and Aruba. He eventually amassed a collection of more than 4,000 flags.

Interviewing Mr. Smith in 2011, the editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica noted that he was their most prolific contributor, having written more than 250 flag histories.

An outspoken opponent of flag-desecration laws, on First Amendment grounds, Mr. Smith appeared as a defense witness for a Massachusetts teenager who had been arrested after wearing a small American flag on the seat of his jeans and sentenced to six months in prison. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court, which in 1974 struck down the state's flag law.

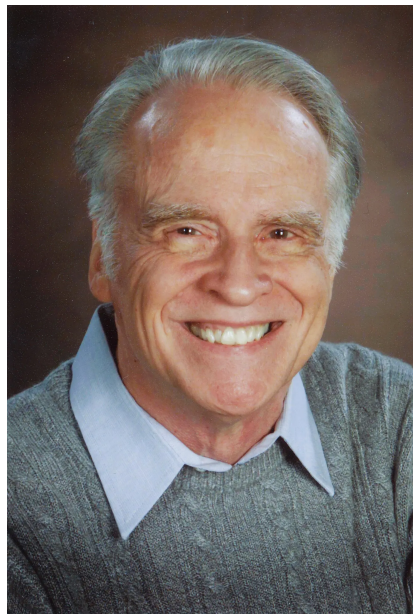
"I'm a monomaniac, that's clear," he told People. "But I'm more fortunate than most people because I have something that infuses my whole life. I relate flags to everything."

Whitney Smith Jr. was born on Feb. 26, 1940, in Arlington, Mass., and grew up in Lexington and Winchester. His father, a lawyer, worked as an investigator for the John Hancock Insurance Company. His mother, the former Mildred Gaffney, sewed ski masks that she sold to Boston department stores.

Her sewing talent came in handy when, in 1960, Mr. Smith designed a national flag for Guyana, which was then emerging from British colonial rule. Mr. Smith wrote to Cheddi Jagan, an independence leader, to ask what the new country's flag was going to be. Mr. Jagan replied that a flag had not been designed and asked for ideas.

Mr. Smith came up with a prototype, a golden arrowlike triangle with an overlapping red triangle against a green ground. He then asked his mother to sew it and sent it in. It was adopted, with slight modifications. Mr. Smith did not find out for six years, when Guyana gained formal independence.

Officials, inviting Mr. Smith to attend an Independence Day celebration, were surprised to discover that the designer of their flag was not a Guyanese émigré, as they had thought, but a white American.



Mr. Smith wrote more than 250 flag histories for the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

After earning a bachelor's degree in political science from Harvard in 1961, Mr. Smith studied at Boston University, where he was awarded a doctorate in political science in 1964. He wrote his dissertation on political symbolism.

He taught at Boston University but left academia in 1970 to devote himself full time to flags, whose importance he never tired of pointing out.

"Flags express the unity and identity of one group as against all others," he told Smithsonian. "That can be ugly — Hitler's swastika flag embodied the dark side of vexillologic symbolism. But flags also can allow frail humans to feel bolstered by higher powers."

With the Dutch scholar Klaes Sierksma, he organized the First International Congress of Vexillology in Muiderberg, the Netherlands, in 1965. He also helped found the North American Vexillological Association and the Flag Heritage Association. His many books on flags included “The Flag Book of the United States” (1970) and “Flag Lore of All Nations” (2001).

In 2013, the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas acquired his enormous collection of flag material, which includes more than 10,000 books, a quarter-million documents and ephemera.

Mr. Smith’s two marriages ended in divorce. In addition to his son Austin, he is survived by another son, Adrian; two sisters, Sybil Smith and Lynne Hartwell; and a grandson.

He had a firm opinion on the American flag: too busy. He argued for a return to the original Stars and Stripes.

“This 13-star flag is aesthetically superior to the 50-star model, as well as easier and less expensive to make,” he wrote in The New York Times in 1971. “But more importantly, a ring of stars better symbolizes our harmony in diversity.”